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ABSTRACT

Adult illiteracy is a major social problem in America today; it is disproportionately high among the poor and minorities. Among the complex causes of illiteracy are ineffective schooling, intergenerational transmission of literacy or illiteracy (reinforced by poverty and discrimination), and rising standards of functional literacy. Beyond the dollar costs, individuals and society pay a price when so many cannot actively participate in social, political, and cultural affairs. The magnitude and scope of the illiteracy problem require a coordinated, fully mobilized national strategy capable of facing the challenges of: outreach to the hard-to-reach illiterate population, lack of a legitimized niche for literacy education in the educational structure, paucity of research and development data, and insufficient financial resources. To help those out of school acquire literacy skills as well as to ensure that children learn to read and write in their formative years, the following steps are recommended: (1) a broad, flexible definition of literacy, (2) a pluralistic delivery system, (3) expanded community-oriented efforts, (4) improved coordination and communication, (5) staff development for literacy educators, (6) more full-time professionals, (7) support services, (8) detailed program evaluation, (9) continued research, and (10) increased Federal support. (SK)

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ADULTS IN CRISIS:

ILLITERACY IN AMERICA

James N. Johnson

NATIONAL ADULT LITERACY PROJECT
FAR WEST LABORATORY

ADULTS IN CRISIS:

ILLITERACY IN AMERICA

by

James N. Johnson

Prepared for the

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a joint project of

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PREFACE

The National Adult Literacy Project (NALP) sponsored by the National Institute of Education, is one component of the President's Initiative on Adult Literacy. Work on NALP began in September 1983 by the Far West Laboratory and the NETWORK, Inc. Adults in Crisis: Illiteracy in America is one of several research and development activities undertaken by the project.

It is intended to inform policy and decision makers at various levels of government of the immensity of the problem of adult illiteracy and to present recommendations related to policy and practice.

Because of the complexity of the problem, the report does not focus on the issues of instruction and prevention, but on the issue of helping adults gain literacy skills through more comprehensive use and coordination of resources.

The initial recommendations generated by literacy experts and contributors, commissioned to develop nine working papers on key problems and issues in adult literacy were modified after they met in Washington to arrive at a consensus on the issues. The recommendations underwent additional modification and refinement by staff based on comments and suggestions by project advisors, and other literacy experts. They are presented in this essay.

Major contributors were: Judith H. Alamprese, William B. Bliss, Ronald M. Cervero, Paul V. Delker, Jon P. Deveaux, Judith A. Koloski, Donald A. McCune, Anabel P. Newman, and Rosemarie J. Park.

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INTRODUCTION

A major social problem in our country is rapidly assuming crisis proportions. But because it is invisible, most Americans are scarcely aware of it. Yet each year it costs billions of dollars in lost productivity, unnecessary accidents, transfer payments, and crime, while taking an incalculable toll in personal anguish and hardship. The crisis is adult illiteracy. In the most technologically advanced society on earth, a shocking 72 million adults between the ages of 18 and 65 are incapable of performing, or have difficulty with, such fundamental tasks as reading the label on a bottle of cough medicine, filling out a job application form, or following the directions on the back of a frozen turkey dinner (U.S. Department of Education). According to the 1975 Adult Performance Level (APL) study at the University of Texas, "approximately one of five Americans is incompetent or functions with difficulty" while "about half of the adult population is merely functional and not at all proficient in necessary skills and knowledge."

The problem is nationwide, cutting across geographic boundaries and social distinctions in every city and every neighborhood in the country. Literacy programs serve sheriff's deputies as well as prisoners, supervisors as well as blue-collar workers and the unemployed. Among professional and managerial workers, according to the Business Council for Effective Literacy, 11 percent are functionally illiterate. But while illiteracy is widespread, it is not spread evenly. It is disproportionately high among poor and minorities. The APL Study found, for example, that more than 40 percent of the Blacks and Hispanics surveyed were functionally illiterate as compared with only 16 percent of the Whites. According to NCES statistics (1984) 14.7 percent of Whites 25 years and older as of 1982 had completed less then nine years of school, as compared to 27.7 percent for Blacks and 40.5 percent for Hispanics. Of the one million teenagers who drop out of high school each year, 80 percent are Black or Hispanic.

WHY SO MANY?

There is no single explanation for why far too many Americans cannot read or write as well as they need to for full productive membership in this society. The problem of illiteracy is complex, spanning a variety of sometimes interrelated causes. The most important of these are poor instruction, the effects of poverty and discrimination, and rising expectations.

Ineffective Schooling

Of the 2.3 million people joining the pool of functional illiterates each year, nearly one million are high school dropouts. But many are "pushouts," persons who finish school without basic skills. A high school diploma, as the National Assessment findings, SAT scores, and major standardized achievement tests

amply demonstrate, is no guarantee that its holder can read at the twelfth grade level, or the tenth, or even the eighth. A host of recent reports and books document why.

John I. Goodlad, for example, studied 1,000 classrooms in 38 schools and reports in A Place Called School (1983) that reading occupies only six percent of class time in elementary grades, three percent in junior-high classes, and a bare two percent in each high school class period. Organized discussions, which serve to hone speaking and thinking skills, took up an average of only 5.1 percent of class time. Similar studies have found that students spend an equally small percentage of class and homework time on writing assignments. Time-on-task in the average American high school is under 50 percent and below 30 percent in most elementary schools.

A recent study of the high school's role in preparing young people for work found that students ask questions only half as often as people in the workplace do, that their reading materials are easier and much less varied, and that they are given few opportunities to apply what they read in functional contexts (Mikulecky, 1983). The National Assessment of Educational Progress, in its study of the verbal and analytical abilities of 106,000 school children ages 9, 13, and 17, found "an emphasis on shallow and superficial opinions at the expense of reasoned and disciplined thought" (1981).

While states are responding to such studies with more rigorous high school curricula and stiffer graduation requirements, reading experts see the elementary grades as the really critical years. It is at this formative stage, when word attack skills are first acquired and consolidated and crucial learning habits formed, that many children are lost, often through tracking and "learning disorder" labels, sometimes through teachers' inability to respond to the cultural characteristics of children who seem slow, inattentive, or hyperactive, and frequently through ineffective methods of instruction. As a result, they enter high school with almost insurmountable disadvantages, and often drop out.

Intergenerational Transmission of Literacy

But causes of the nation's literacy dilemma reach far beyond the classroom. Illiteracy is in part a socioeconomic problem and always has been.

Middle-class literate parents are more likely to cultivate reading readiness by having books and magazines around the house, modeling in their daily talk relatively sophisticated levels of standard English usage, and reading to their children for pleasure. We know that children who are frequently read to by their parents enter school equipped with higher levels of syntactic development and larger vocabularies than children who are not read to (Chomsky, 1970). And once formal schooling is underway

the same parents are more likely to take an active role in its progress, helping with homework, and promoting positive attitudes toward learning.

Poverty, on the other hand, can affect the language base, scope of personal experience, and self-concept in ways that impede development of a child's language skills. In low-income families isolated from the mainstream culture parents are not likely to have much schooling, to read books, or use the language fluently. Research shows that disadvantaged children, if taught properly, perform like middle-class children for the first three grades, but then begin to decelerate, falling steadily behind. What's missing is language, vocabulary, and the cognitve structures necessary for interpreting texts.

Thus illiteracy is transmitted, Sticht observes, from generation to generation: "Typically children who came from homes in which the parents are illiterate or only marginally literate become the next generation of students who do poorly in school and who may drop out and find themselves eligible for adult basic education."

Rising Expectations

In the 1920s a fifth grade reading level was considered the minimum functional requirement; during World War II the benchmark rose to an eighth grade equivalency; now most educators are saying it should be twelfth grade. Because of this steady climb, the skills of a great many Americans, though substantilly above the average adult level forty years ago, are unequal to the more sophisticated demands of today's technologically advancing society.

The days when the economy could absorb large numbers of unschooled and unskilled laborers who, in the words of professor Diane Ravitch, could "get through life reading no more than baseball scores," are fading fast. The hallmark of a post-industrial society, according to Daniel Bell, is that an "intellectual technology" rises alongside of a machine technology, placing an unprecedented premium on the ability of its members to absorb and manipulate information.

Prophesies of a global upgrading in occupational knowledge and skill have of course been challenged. Gainsayers point out that while certain high skilled jobs are proliferating, the economy is generating an equally large number of "deskilled" jobs in the expanding service sector, perhaps best exemplified by the fast food industry whose counter clerks are no longer required to put pencil to order pad or even retain prices in their heads. But forecasts like those of Larry Vickering, head of personnel for General Motors, typify the prevailing view of things to come: "In 1981 we have five unskilled workers for every technically trained worker. Within 15 years the ratio will be one-to-one." (Wall Street Journal, March, 1981) In their study of occupational settings, Mikulecky (1984) and his associates found that 70 percent of the reading material encountered in a cross-section

of jobs is between ninth and twelfth grade level in difficulty, and that 15 percent is above that. Studies of military occupations show a similar, higher than expected increase, averaging tenth to twelfth grade levels. As the average blue-collar worker consults instruction forms, tables, graphs, manuals, directions, printouts, and the like, he reads more than an hour and a half daily--which is more than the average high school student reads during a typical school day. Even the most menial jobs are no longer literacy-free, and employers are finding it dangerous to hire functional illiterates, as evidenced in a recent court case involving a janitor who mixed the wrong solvents together for cleaning and burned out his lungs. Available evidence supports Mikulecky's claim of "a dramatic reduction in places you can be if you can't read or write and continue to teach yourself on the job" (1984).

Yet it is not just in the role of producers that Americans face more complex literacy demands but also as consumers, parents, and citizens--in virtually every realm of contemporary life. If a child accidentally swallows lye, her parent would need a reading grade level of 9.6 to understand the instructions for giving the antidote. In the average major daily newspaper, wire service articles average eleventh grade, while editorials and journalistic essays treating more complex social, political, economic, and technological issues are usually written at twelfth-grade and above. The reading level of life insurance policies is 12.7 and to comprehend the average lease agreement for apartment rentals requires college level ability. Jeanne Chall, director of the Harvard Reading Laboratory, recently served as an expert consultant in two class-action lawsuits. She found that while federal housing contracts and notices about food stamps were written at a college level, the people they were intended for average only seventh or eighth grade reading skills. Similarly, after giving a readability check to a divestiture notice regarding new phone repair policy mailed out by the New England Telephone Company, Chall concluded that for about 30 or 40 percent of the households in New England "it may as well have been in Greek or Latin" (Chall, 1984).

While the standards of minimal acceptable literacy continue to escalate, the problem cannot be solved by simplifying materials, for the nature of the content precludes lowering the readability very much. The prevailing outlook, as expressed by the editors of Education Week in their September, 1984 special report on literacy, is that "all citizens will need to possess a high level of literacy to lead full lives and to meet the obligations of responsible citizenry in an increasingly complex world."

WHAT ARE THE COSTS?

By every statistical measure illiteracy correlates highly with low income level, unemployment and underemployment, public assistance, and crime. According to the APL study, 40 percent of adults with incomes under $5,000 a year are functionally illit-

erate, compared with only eight percent of those earning over $15,000. The cost of welfare and unemployment compensation due to illiteracy is estimated at $6 billion annually. Illiterate adults are thought to include 60 to 80 percent of the nation's prisoners, at a cost of $6.6 billion a year, more than half the chronically unemployed, and a third of all welfare recipients.

The Department of Labor estimated that up to three fourths of the eight million unemployed in 1982 lacked the reading and writing skills that would enable employers to train them. While it is difficult to gauge the effect of poor language skills on productivity, 75 percent of the businesses surveyed by the Center for Public Resources in 1983 say their employees are deficient in basic skills. The Center found, for example, that AT&T spends $6 million a year to improve the reading and math skills of 14,000 employees. Reports from the military are similar. According to the Department of Navy one quarter of its recent recruits cannot read at the minimum level required to understand written safety instructions.

Other costs are harder to put dollar signs on, but they are equally critical. The responsible citizenship necessary for a viable democracy requires a literate society, not just literate individuals. Society pays a price when all its members are not actively participating in its social, political, and cultural institutions. We don't know how to measure the ways illiteracy can color a person's social character, family life, his overall sense of worth and dignity, or the countless daily ways it acts as a barrier to full citizenship, but the cost is clearly very high.

Illiteracy in twentieth century America carries the stigma of a social disease. It connotes primitive mentality: "Illiterate adults are seen not only as nonfunctional, but also as unable to take their place in society with the dignity accorded to all human beings" (Figueret, 1984). For many the inability to read or read well is a badge of shame they will go to great lengths to conceal. Thus the Washington Post recently referred to illiterates as "the nation's last great closet minority...so determined and adept at hiding their handicap that literacy workers are accustomed to arranging secret meetings." A policeman in a small town since 1930, who was semi-literate but had managed to get by, met his literacy tutor in a town 30 miles away so no one would know, and a logger asked to be tutored in the back room of a bar because he dared not be seen in a library or school. Admitting illiteracy, one eighteen year old student said, is harder than admitting a drug or alcohol problem.

Illiterates do survive, finding ingenious ways to get around their inability to decode words. They can memorize bus markings, street signs, and brand names, or have a friend fill out applications. But while illiterate adults may take pride in their worldly savvy, they cannot read to their children, decipher report cards, or follow instructions for assembling a Christmas toy.

For millions of Americans the onus of illiteracy is compounded by what Mezirow, Darkenwald, and Knox describe as:

> the failure syndrome endemic to ghetto, barrio, and reservation--a continually reinforced conviction of failure and incompetence, bred by a grim history of frustrating school experiences and subsequent inability to support oneself and one's family, which becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. Dealt nothing but losses by society's stacked deck of chances for success, a man becomes terrified by the threat of being tested again and still found wanting. Nothing fails like failure (1975, p. 29).

Thus, as Wallerstein aptly puts it: "Illiteracy is not isolated from students' other life problems; these problems show up in class, if adults come at all, as low self-esteem or as hidden voices that block learning."

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Since the Federal government publicly established adult illiteracy as a major social problem almost two decades ago, some important strides have been made. Under the aegis of the Adult Education Act (AEA) and through the growing efforts of volunteer orgainzations such as Lauback Literacy International and Literacy Volunteers of America, literacy instruction has become increasingly accessible to adults in inner cities, rural settings, prisions, and migrant camps, where twenty years ago none existed. Committee educators are striving with restricted resources to find better ways of helping adults break the code of literacy, with some notable successes.

This represents a good start. But as President Reagan's literacy initiative and all available evidence clearly testify, it is only a start. In both magnitude and scope the problem still far exceeds the current effort to meet it. Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs only reach about 2.2 million--while the number of illiterates grows by at least that amount each year. It is estimated that the total array of current programs, public and private combined, serves no more that four percent of the country's illiterate population. In order to complete the task of achieving a fully mobilized capability, one that can effectively reduce adult illiteracy on a nationwide scale, policy makers and practitioners together must meet some pressing challenges.

Reaching the Unreachables

Chief among such challenges is the fact that the national effort has so far reached only a small fraction of the population most in need of literacy training--the "hard-to-reach"

beginning readers, the majority of whom are both poor and members of racial and cultural minorities. As numerous studies emphasize, ABE programs, operating through the public school system, and national volunteer programs, operating primarily with middle-class volunteers, have both tended to attract only the "cream" of the illiterate population, those already comfortable enough with traditional educational norms to self-select into such programs and who are "most easily served: most motivated and higher up on the educational ladder" (McCullough, 1981; ACBE, 1983). While ABE became "captive of the content of high school equivalency and the format of certification," (Delker, 1984) the least literate and most alienated have remained "hidden and insulated."

The long-acknowledged problem of motivation, chronically cited as a major obstacle, has made "recruitment" and "retention" dominant themes: "How to attract even a fraction of the adult illiterates into our programs," as Wallerstein puts it, those "who may not see the need for a literacy class even if one was advertised in their neighborhood laundromat or on the local bus," and how, if they do come, to maintain their consistent interest and regular attendance. This lack of motivation, often characterized from the culture-of-poverty perspective as apathy and poor attitudes, stems in part from the fact that many illiterate adults simply do not believe literacy will solve their problems (Fingeret, 1984; Fitzgerald, 1984).

In calling for "more innovative and aggressive outreach efforts" and for "clarity of enrollment focus", the 1980 Development Associates study described the reluctance of state and local administrators to respond to the Adult Education Act's 1978 amendments which "signaled" for more active outreach.

> Programs are now filled with the expenditure of little or no effort on recruitment, and there is a natural resistance to change. In part, they also are not certain who is meant by the 'most in need,' how to proceed to find them, or entirely convinced that emphasizing these individuals as opposed to those most desiring adult education is the appropriate way to proceed. In part, too, they have valid concerns about the expenses involved in terms of additional costs of recruiting, instruction, and supportive services in a time of . . . relatively unstable resources (Young, et. al, 1980, p. 242-243).

The "change" being resisted would also entail redefinition of program success. A serious effort to bring in "unreachables" at the 0-3 reading grade level would mean taking longer to achieve program goals.

Staffing and Staff Training

Some of the obstacles an improved national effort must overcome stem, directly or indirectly, from adult basic education's marginal status as a foster child of the normative school system;

from the fact that "the types of programs which are necessary for dealing with adult functional illiteracy fall within the least developed realm of educational practice" (Harman, 1984).

Criticism of early adult literacy programs focused on what amounted to the wholesale appropriation of conventional grade school and high school curricula to the unfamiliar task of teaching mature adults how to read. Typically this meant part-time "moonlighting" elementary and secondary teachers, who were not atuned to the developmental differences betwen children and seasoned adults nor prepared to individualize instruction for clients with highly diverse needs, using inappropriate materials, often in inappropriate settings.

Circumstances have improved. Ten years ago Weber complained of the "childishness and colorless content of materials designed for adults," most of which had "hardly departed in any significant way from the objectives and curricula of children's reading programs." Now, as a result of efforts to identify a broad spectrum of substantive topics of real interest to adults, more relevant and sophisticated materials are being generated. Nevertheless, while experienced teachers are increasingly able to utilize more appropriate learning strategies in a variety of contexts and settings, the need for more and better qualified professional staff still looms large, particularly in view of the growing emphasis on volunteers.

Coordination and Communication

Lack of a legitimized niche in the educational structure--and all that implies, from teacher training courses, certification, and competitive salaries to institutionalized constituency--has so far prevented adult basic and literacy education from becoming a priority concern both at the federal level and in state administrative agencies. Thus a critical problem is the insularity among the diverse array of literacy programs, a lack of communication which retards the spread of new ideas and improvement in practice. The challenge here is to create new networks and alliances among literacy educators across the nation which facilitate vital exchange of knowledge and place the goals of individual programs in the context of a larger common purpose.

Evaluation and Research

A paucity of data on literacy gains, post-program accomplishments, and effectiveness of particular rogram features or methods, hinders the ability of educators to build on strengths and correct weaknesses. There is indeed evidence of success, particularly among community-oriented programs, in reaching and motivating "hard-core illiterates and angry young drop-outs" (e.g., the outreach strategies used by the Bronx Educational Services, or how "cultural literacy" programs tap into the life experience of clients to motivate learning through custom-designed problem-posing "codes"). But such information is not generally available to literacy educators, in part because of a

lack of systematic procedures for identifying promising practice and disseminating what is currently known, and in part because there is a dearth of descriptive evaluative data about delivery systems: how they work, whom they serve, what their outcomes are, and how they attempt to solve special problems. There is the attendent need to know more about the nature of literacy and how adults acquire it. These gaps in knowledge are exacerbated by the lack of real links between literacy programs to promote and facilitate the generation and sharing of such knowledge.

Financial Resources

It is persuasively argued, particularly by those who speak from the vantage of success in reaching the unreachables, that the politics of illiteracy exaggerate the special difficulties of outreach and retention and that the real problem is not lack of know-how but lack of interest, mobilization, and resources. Deveaux speaks for many experienced practitioners in his claim that "all adults who lack literacy can be reached, retained, and taught" if programs are appropriately designed and properly staffed, but that vigorous recruitment is not only pointless but demoralizing without programs to put them in: "People have to be placed on waiting lists because there is not enough funding available to create enough classes to help them learn" (Deveaux, 1984). In 1984, for example, ABE classes in Illinois served 117,000 persons but were unable to accommodate an additional 112,000 who sought to enroll. California, which served 600,000 adults, estimates that it had to turn away at least 1,000 persons a week.

Only a major influx of resources can turn the literacy problem around. The maximum amount of funding ever available for adult education efforts ($122 million in 1982) can provide only what Koloski (1984) calls a bandaid where major survery is required: "Even if one uses the often quoted and presumed low figure of 23 million functional illiterates in our society, resources are nowhere near the amount necessary to deal with the magnitude of the problem."

These challenges are addressed in the following recommendations, which draw on an extensive review of the literature, site investigations of diverse literacy programs, commissioned papers by experts in the field, and dialogue at both national and regional conferences. The recommendations do not deal directly with operational issues, such as specific instructional methods or materials, but with policy aimed at expanding and improving the national literacy effort.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Stopping the growing blight of national illiteracy requires a two-pronged approach: 1) helping those already out of school acquire the literacy skills they missed during the early acculturating years at home and in school, while at the same time 2)

taking steps to ensure that children entering school do learn to read and write in those early formative years. Both obviously, are critical and both are multidimensional. The second part of this dual thrust, preventative measures, requires its own full set of recommendations, including: encouraging all parents to read to their preschool children; more transgenerational programs that help illiterate or semiliterate parents become role models for learning; public library programming for children and youth as a community educational resource; and identifying and disseminating successful strategies for teaching reading -- ranging from well designed phonics instruction to more interesting reading primers. This paper necessarily focuses on the first part, on broadening the scope and improving the quality of adult literacy education.

The first two recommendations seek to affirm some important assumptions about the nature of literacy, the needs and characteristics of illiterate adults, and the purposes of literacy education. The improvements required for a truly effective national effort are not merely a matter of funds, coordination, and training; they are also very much a question of value and perspective.

1. Federal Policy Should Be Informed by a Board and Flexible Definition of Literacy

There is persisting concern that the Adult Education Act's official goals are "narrowly utilitarian" (Darkenwald and Valentine, 1984); that "federal monies have traditionally tied literacy instruction to employment" (Patterson and Pulling, 1981). No one questions the importance of being able to get and keep a job or find a better one. Literacy skills requisite to employability are clearly indispensable. Rather, concern is that the emphasis on vocational training, an emphasis perceived by some as likely to grow stronger, rests on the narrowest possible view of the functional uses of literacy, the actual needs of illiterate adults, we well as the needs of society.

If literacy is a passe partout that opens doors of opportunity in the greater society, it is also an indispensable key for opening smaller ones in an individual's myriad daily encounters with the local community, for understanding and gaining access to its institutions and services, and for achieving "a sense of control over one's personal and social reality." Literacy in this sense refers to what educators sometimes call "quality of life" outcomes, the most private yet perhaps largest dimension of one's membership in modern society.

Literacy is not just a job-getting tool, helping people off the streets and welfare rolls, but a tool they need to secure decent housing, drive and insure automobiles, receive medical care or legal assistance. It is a tool they may require in order to become more effective learning models for their children and to break the cycle of illiteracy. Weber pursues the question of personal development even further by considering

> the implications of literacy for sharpening and extending memory, for making reasonable decisions, for distinguishing with precision the desirable from the undesirable, for seeing things from new slants, for discovering talents in oneself, for learning satisfying skills and enjoyable games, for reflecting on one's place in the world, and for undertaking enterprising and constructive change within and outside oneself (1975, p. 151).

Based on a careful review of the national outcome studies conducted so far, Darkenwald and Valentine (1984) conclude that "most of the important outcomes or benefits of participation in ABE have little or nothing to do with employment." The national survey conducted by Kent (1972) found that two-thirds of the adults surveyed in literacy programs gave self-improvement, not employability, as the chief reason for attending. The more recent national assessment conducted by Development Associates (1980) found the same thing. Only 7.7 percent said one of the reasons for enrolling was to get a job, and only 5.7 percent wanted to get a better job. The same is true of Community-Based programs.

If employment, then, is not the chief aim of literacy clients, what is? Purposes are as varied as the individuals who enroll. Some seek to pass the GED or get an AA or BA degree. Some want to be able to read to their children, help them with their homework, or take a more active interest in what they are learning. One woman wants to learn to read hymns so she can sing solo in the church choir. A man wants to understand medical terms pertinent to his son's surgery. Some seek improved literacy skills in order to form food coops, tenant's rights groups, or help establish local newspapers. Some want to read in order "to feel like a whole person," or as another respondent put it: "so I can get up on Sunday morning, sit in my chair, and read the Sunday paper like everyone else in America."

The question persists, as Torres and Harnisch (1983) put it in their review of literacy testing across the country: "What is literacy and how much of it do you have to have before you are considered functional?" The ideal answer, proposed by the National Academy of Education Reading Committee, would be the attainment of twelfth grade literacy--roughly, the ability to read with understanding nearly all the material printed in The New York Times or a magazine like Newsweek (Carroll and Chall, 1975). A more realistic answer is that only the individual can decide. As Torres and Harnisch conclude, "There is no one way to define all the behaviors implied by functional literacy for any one group." It can only be defined in the kind of broad and flexible terms proposed by Hunter and Harman:

> the possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders, and members of social, religious, or

other associations of their choosing. This includes the ability to obtain information they want and to use that information for their own and others' well-being; the ability to write adequately to satisfy the requirements they set for their own lives; the ability to deal positively with demands made on them by society; and the ability to solve the problems they face in their daily lives. (1979, pp. 7-8)

Or more simply by Mikulecky: "Functional literacy is being able to do with literacy what one must."

The Adult Education Act should be further amended to specify that literacy education need not be tied to employability and that other individual and community goals--ranging from self-improvement to quality-of-life outcomes--are legitimate and fundable aims. This broader definition of the purposes of literacy education should also stipulate the use of broader criteria for assessing program achievement. Despite the 1978 amendments, there remains a perceived disparity between AEA's stated goals and the actual goals of clients and programs. The disparity is both unnecessary and dysfunctional.

In view of the long-standing structural inequities that characterize our socioeconomic system, quality-of-life outcomes ought to be perceived as legitimate and fundable objectives in and of themselves as part of the birthright of millions of American citizens whose educational and economic opportunities have been unduly circumscribed by their social and cultural origins.

Moreover, such outcomes do yield significant returns on society's investment. Gains such as improved self-concept and greater self-confidence, which the overwhelming majority of adults surveyed cited as their most important benefits, are crucial for becoming more responsible citizens, productive workers, and for reversing the intergenerational transmission of illiteracy. Studies indicate that gains in literacy, set in motion for whatever particular reason, result in further learning and that increased education indirectly leads to occupational betterment. For many illiterate adults literacy is not an economic or occupational panacea, whereas virtually any gains through increased literacy--from self-esteem to broader social perspective--works directly or indirectly to benefit society.

2. Pluralistic Delivery System

This broad definition of literacy implies a diversity of instructional approaches in a variety of forms and settings (including public, private sector, volunteer, and community-based) as opposed to any attempt to normalize literacy instruction through the establishment of a centralized national entity with vested authority to articulate the total literacy system. The problem of illiteracy in this society is clearly too large and too complex to be addressed by any single instructional approach or program philosophy. Society's diverse, often special-

ized literacy needs, reflected by the different program sectors--state-administered, employment and training, correctional, military, community-based, and post-secondary--span a wide radius of social purpose, political and economic interest, and functional context.

Equally diverse are the particular needs and personal goals of the individuals served. "The tremendous range in the ethnic, cultural, and economic characteristics of the client group," as McCune says, "requires an equally broad range of organizations, agencies, groups and individuals that can respond to its needs." Learning objectives range from passing examinations and receiving degrees to improving the quality of life in local communities, becoming better informed parents, and enhancing one's sense of self-worth. Some learners, comfortable with traditional educational norms, are well served by individually-oriented programs; but for those with a history of alienation and "failure" in conventional schooling, the traditional classroom model, and the stereotypic "mainstreaming" assumptions it commonly makes about the needs and characteristics of clients, presents major problems.

The attempt to impose a standardized definition of literacy or uniform methods and measures would probably prove unworkable given the pluralistic values underlying the present scope of literacy efforts. It would certainly prove dysfunctional by limiting the range of choices available to adult learners.

Any definition of literacy specific enough to determine goals and content for programming, as Cervero (1984) points out, "is principally an expression of values." For example, a careful analysis of the APL study demonstrated to Griffith and Cervero (1977) that its underlying educational philosophy is that of "adjustment to the status quo rather than an active inquiring attitude compatible with the notion of responsible citizenship in a free society" (p. 221). On the other hand, many of the community-oriented programs actively cultivate in their students a critical consciousness of the social environment shaping their existence and of their potential for changing it. Thus while consensus may be achieved at the level of global mission statement, a common operational definition is not feasible in contemporary America.

In any case, the real benefits of diversity far outweigh the dubious gains in accountability suggested by a centralized system of normative standards. It is the very lack of such a scheme which provides the flexibility and latitude in methods, materials, value positions, and theoretical perspectives so essential to meeting the needs of diverse client populations.

At the same time, pluralistic and context approaches must not be used to legitimize limited expectations or perpetuate stratification of standards of achievement. It is not hard to detect in some of the contextual rhetoric the complacent traditional paternalism that accepts this cultural isolation as permanent. Focusing on such deficits as apathy and lack of

future orientation, the attitude here is that the most literacy education can do is provide the hard-to-reach with the "coping" skills necessary for survival, rather than with sufficient skills to enable them to take control of their lives. The assumption is that these individuals have made a conscious choice to remain outside the mainstream of American life. Such a view disregards the extend to which lopsided illiteracy rates--three and four times higher for Blacks and Hispanics than for Whites--are the residual effects of historical barriers to quality education and the social distribution of knowledge. Literacy education must be based on equality of expectations; its goal must be to provide everyone the option (the needed knowledge and skills) to enter the mainstream.

3. Expand Community-Oriented Efforts

Most ABE programs are individually oriented, concerned with "mainstreaming" the individual into the dominant society of middle-class values and perspectives, and content is secondary to teaching reading skills. Community-oriented programs, on the other hand, do not isolate literacy skill acquisition from other issues clients may be facing, and tend to see the literacy process as a means of empowerment. Since literacy in and of itself cannot alter structural inequities or socioeconomic sources of powerlessness, community-oriented programs use literacy instruction as a means of promoting critical awareness, self-confidence, self-esteem, community participation, all the other things necessary to change one's life circumstances and gain more control over one's fate (part of which may include being able to get a job or a better job). Here content becomes crucial. The life experiences of clients are used to motivate learning and cultivate critical understanding of common issues that affect their lives. But instruction is also concerned with bridging the cultural gap, by broadening the learner's direct and vicarious experiential base, expanding cultural perspective through new concepts and ideas, using the reading process to enlarge one's understanding of the world. The distinction between individual and community oriented programs is easily overdrawn, but it is extremely useful in thinking about the purpose of literacy education and the role of content. Fingeret (1984) comments:

> As long as reading is seen as a series of discrete skills that can be taught in isolation and are not dependent upon comprehension of actual content, literacy programs can be conceptualized as simple skill-building efforts in which the cultural background of the learner is relatively irrelevant at the initial stages of reading instruction. However, when reading is perceived as the interaction between a learner's way of viewing the world and the cues in the text, then the learner's experiential base and approach to constructing meaning takes on new significance (p. 14).

By every indication this smallest and least-funded group of programs best serves the largest group of illiterates--those who are poor and of minority background. As an important step toward ensuring that the least literate and most in need are reached, some percentage of state 310 monies should be targeted to Community-Based Organizations (CBOs). Replication of such exemplary models should utilize networks already functioning with the earned trust of their communities (e.g., community development corporations, churches, neighborhood centers, libraries) as sources of outreach, community trained volunteers, and facilities.

4. Coordination and Communication

At present the individuality and insularity of the varied literacy programs works to impede improvement in practice and the development of leadership necessary for a concerted national effort. This separateness is marked by a certain degree of competitiveness, related to acquisition of funds, to organizational pride and protectiveness, and to differing educational perspectives. But the chief problem is that there are no real linkages between programs to coordinate and facilitate the vital exchange of energy, ideas, and information. Consequently innovation tends to occur in isolation. The more unique a program is in terms of clients served or instructional strategies used, the more likely it is to be insulated from other programs that share a common concern for reducing illiteracy (McCune, 1984). ABE teachers have little detailed familiarity with successful methods in other classrooms, and directors have limited knowledge of effective program practices in other cities, regions, or states (Mezirow, 1975; Fingeret, 1984). Rarely are successful approaches in community-oriented programs examined as replicable models. At the same time, community-oriented programs recognize the need to increase their visibility in the literacy field and to strengthen links with others working in it as a means of improving both managerial and educational effectiveness (ACBE, 1983).

This recommendation proposes that state and national leadership be exerted to help literacy educators across the nation forge their own system of linkages, coming together in networks that transcend program affiliation to bring a sense of national focus to the problem of illiteracy. It consists of three levels of interlinking alliances.

A national alliance of literacy programs, services, and associations should be established, including federal agencies, literacy volunteer associations, public library literacy programs, private sector programs, and other independent literacy associations (e.g., AOIP, Association for Community-Based Education). Its function will be to provide non-affiliated leadership at the national level, aimed at helping literacy educators see their efforts as part of a complex, multifaceted national agenda to reduce illiteracy, and to promote coordination and communication at national state, and local levels.

A state level alliance comprised of representatives from local service area alliances and state level literacy programs, services, associations, and departments. These state level alliances will 1) provide forums for information sharing and discussion and for extending the state of the art through conferences and workshops, in formats that respect the integrity of individual approaches while recognizing interdependence and common purpose; 2) promote more effective collaboration between educational and service agencies, between professional and volunteer programs, and between educational programs and private sector employers; 3) be a link between the national alliance; and 4) provide leadership that transcends immediate needs of the local alliance and center on the larger problem of illiteracy.

Local service area alliances comprised of members of local literacy programs that would be responsible for facilitating the development of effective local programs, for sharing training and technical assistance resources, and to provide a link to their state level alliance through which they would be linked to the national alliance. Information flow through all three levels of alliance can be coordinated through existing clearinghouses.

5. Staff Development

In no area of public education is the need to professionalize instruction more critical than in the still relatively new, institutionally marginal field of adult literacy education. Study after study emphasizes the imperative of staff development, the need to train teachers in a variety of skills, "some or all of which are not required in traditional elementary or even secondary school settings" (Young, 1980). The majority of literacy instructors enter programs with little or no formal training. Overall, less than a third of ABE teachers are certified in adult education or have completed college work relevant to the specialized task of instructing adult illiterates. Teacher training institutions and schools of education by and large have not included in their curricula programs that prepare teachers for this specialized role, and the pre-service training most literacy instructors receive is cursory and incomplete. This deficit takes on added urgency with the current emphasis on the widespread use of volunteers as a means of expanding literacy instruction. Volunteer tutors, while a valuable support to professional staff, can only be as effective as the quality of their training and supervision.

No one is more keenly aware of the need than literacy educators themselves. During site visits conducted by the National Adult Literacy Project staff in 1984 staff development emerged as a cardinal concern. Program directors and instructors, echoing their peers across the nation, consistently cited such problems as the need for tutors to acquire background in reading theory and process, to know more about how adults learn, and how to accommodate different cognitive styles; the need for techniques in working with special needs students; and for ongoing training

in interpersonal skills. Too often staff are forced to fall back on hunches or one or two references at hand which may or may not be relevant to what learners need and want. They often have limited resources and are isolated from others who are grappling with similar problems.

Despite the paucity of descriptive data on effective practice, we know something about what goes into successful teacher-learner interactions. Accumulating experience and research to date suggest that the ability to foster self-esteem, be supportive, listen, and be culturally and socially sensitive are crucial, particularly in overcoming the hidden barriers of doubt and resentment that impede learning (Longfield, 1984; McCullough, 1981; Veri, 1980). But the affective dimensions of literacy instruction, while of critical importance, are only part of what is needed. Being a caring committed person will not in itself produce quality learning. Equally essential are such facilitator skills as needs assessment, goal setting, resource referral, and being adept at selecting, ecclectically utilizing, and custom-designing materials to suit the specific needs of individuals and groups. These require understanding of the reading process and skills that may be unique to successful adult literacy instruction, such as teaching reading as the discovery of meaning (Boraks and Schumacher, 1981; Raisner, 1978), the value of using peer and group instruction (Campbell, 1979; Mocker, 1980) and the ability to adapt teaching not only to what the student wants to learn but also to how the student wants to learn (Boraks and Schumacher, 1981).

Paid and volunteer staff need inservice assistance in acquiring such skills--what is already known about them and what is being learned--and in gathering current information, sharing effective strategies, broadening ideas, and accessing available resources. At the same time program administrators need planning assistance in choosing and implementing appropriate program designs. This recommendation focuses on the process for facilitating such assistance.

Generic Training Models. Flexible and comprehensive training models should be developed for both administrators and staff developers. They should provide a planning framework and a set of procedures administrators can use to weigh options, select and implement suitable program designs, and utilize appropriate management structures and techniques. Such steps should include: acquiring background information on the state-of-the-art in literacy education, articulating a program philosophy, assessing needs and setting goals, identifying instructional methods and resources, determining formative and outcome evaluation measures, and forming community partnerships. The models should also provide flexible procedures for training both professional and volunteer staff in the affective, facilitator, and process skills outlined above. The models should be adaptable to the needs of any literacy program, usable in any setting. No single program design or teaching method should be advocated; rather emphasis

should be on giving staff the theoretical and practical underpinning they need to utilize materials and apply strategies appropriate to the particular need at hand.

Capacity-Building. Local capability to provide training and technical assistance should be strengthened through cadres of experienced people whose knowledge and skills can be exchanged among programs throughout their district or region. The aim here is to develop internal resources, utilizing structures already in place, such as libraries, educational laboratories, and other literacy programs, thus providing a mechanism to acquire training and technical assistance cost effectively at the local level. This would provide local programs access to resources and at the same time alleviate the need to bear the cost. This capability can be accessed through local, state, and national alliances.

Teacher Preparation. The adult education curricula in teacher training institutions should be strengthened with a broad range of courses directly related to literacy instruction, in such areas as the reading process and instructional methods for adults; diverse means of diagnosis and assessment; human relations, counseling skills, and multicultural awareness; computer assisted instruction; and developing program goals and philosophy.

6. More Full-Time Positions

Combining the expertise of full-time professionals with the commitment of properly trained volunteers would not only improve the quality of individual programs but would also contribute directly to the professionalization and impetus of the national effort. ABE teachers are overwhelmingly "moonlighters." Eighty-three percent are employed only part-time, a circumstance reaching back to the exigencies of early days and what McCullough calls "the constant problems associated with part-time, moonlighting, untrained, tired teachers." Based on their two-year study of urban literacy programs, Mezirow et. al. concluded: "There is compelling evidence that a more coherent, sophisticated, and agressively developed program results from the employment in ABE of professionally trained adult educators as full-time directors" and teachers (1975, p. 158). The need to complement volunteer services with professional supervision cannot be overstressed. Preservice training, no matter how high its quality, must by definition be limited in scope. Without proper on-going training and the coordination of full-time professionals, it is unreasonable to expect the increased use of volunteers to have significant impact on the national problem of illiteracy.

7. Support Services

As a crucial ingredient of more effective outreach, special attention must be paid to identifying barriers to participation and removing them through the provision of support services. Some adult illiterates face only the hurdles of embarrassment and hard work required to learn to read. Others, living at or below

the poverty level, face an additional set of obstacles. It is not possible to attend school regularly and do homework if you don't have a decent place to live or cannot afford eyeglasses to read with or transportation to get to a literacy program or have no one to take care of your children while you attend. To ensure that the least educated and most in need are able to participate in and benefit from literacy education, ancillary services such as transportation, child care, legal aid, counseling, medical care, assistance with employment and government agencies must be provided.

8. Evaluation

Enhancing the scope and quality of the national effort is presently hampered by what McCune (1984) aptly calls "a huge void in the descriptive data about literacy programs." Little detailed information is available telling "who is delivering these programs, what they do, how many are served, how well they work, what they cost, how they are funded, and what unmet needs they might have. Student data are in equally short supply with regard to levels of performance, rate of growth, and benefits derived from various instructional approaches." The need to fill this void is especially acute, both for validating program utility and effectiveness in order to ensure continued support, and for upgrading all facets of instructional capability.

Demands for accountability in these times of shrinking state and federal educational budgets, the need for "bottom-line" evidence of instructional success or impact as a means of continued and increased support, is one pressing reason for documentation of program results. Yet equally pressing is the need for a clearer understanding of what works best for whom and why in the form of descriptive information, quantitative and qualitative, that literacy administrators, directors, and teachers can use to improve their own programs. However, the design and application of sound program evaluation, indispensable to generating such information, is currently hindered by several interrelated obstacles.

Chief among these is inadequate financial resources. Most programs simply lack the personnel and fiscal resources needed to undertake proper evaluation. Darkenwald and Valentine (1984) found that directors felt they were already overwhelmed with "paperwork" requirements and could not take on the additional burden of data collection and reporting. Linked to fiscal shortages is lack of expertise. Most directors are untrained in the techniques of design and measurement and do not have access to this kind of expertise.

The problem of appropriate measures makes such expertise especially important. As we have seen, client goals are not necessarily the same as program goals or those legislatively mandated and easily quantified. Outcome assessment to date has focused on the measurement of reading levels (some of which are not standardized for adults), on functional literacy competen-

cies, and on job-related skills. A major shortcoming of such measures is that they ignore other important aspects of literacy achievement, such as the enhancement of self-esteem, or the realization of such personal or community goals as those cited earlier in the paper. Many educators consider externally imposed standards such as the APL competencies of limited usefulness and deem their programs successful if the students are meeting their own objectives. In addition, decisions to use a literacy test with a particular group must consider the appropriateness of its definition of literacy, the hidden value system built into it, for that group (Torres and Harnisch, 1983). The broad flexible definition of literacy advocated in this paper makes "ecological validity" an important criterion in the construction, selection, and use of measures of achievement.

Other perceived barriers have to do with a certain traditional resistance to evaluation common to educators everywhere. Staff often consider the use of data collecting instruments and questionnaires as disruptive to the instructional process (Alamprese, 1984). Clients themselves sometimes resist participating in such activities because of negative associations with prior experiences in the whole realm of testing. In each case the problem is an informational one, helping both staff and students understand both the immediate and long-term utility of such information in facilitating learning.

Broad range of evaluation activities. Most programs have multiple outcomes for their clients, and some of the most important ones, such as self-esteem, are not quantifiable. Evaluation designs must incorporate a diverse array of measurement techniques, including such qualitative means as profiles, simulation, demonstrations, and observations, in order to capture a broad array of outcomes. Evaluation should not confine itself to reading levels, or quantitative outcomes such as jobs or GED certifications, but must be conducted in terms of learner, program, and community goals. New approaches are being developed, such as the California Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS), with the flexibility necessary for this kind of multi-dimensional adaptive approach to evaluation. The CASAS system provides options enabling program staff to design assessment that measures locally defined competencies and learning outcomes, yet in a framework that permits common articulation across districts and agencies.

Learner Diagnosis and Assessment. Similarly, diagnosis and assessment should reflect and accommodate the goals of the learner, the program, and community. These may include both formal and informal means of determining abilities and achievement, competency-based skills, affective need, and quality of life outcomes and needs related to family and community.

Resources. Organizations funding literacy programs should provide sufficient financial resources necessary to design and conduct evaluation activities, and literacy programs should assume responsibility for formally assessing their own effective-

ness. Darkenwald (1984) presents a centralized follow-up model for publically funded ABE programs which is designed to integrate student follow-up with the Division of Adult Education's existing data collection and analysis system. It would require little additional staff time or cost at the local program level. The additional cost and staff time at the state level would be minimal since student follow-up would "piggy-back" on computerized procedures already in place.

Training and technical assistance in program evaluation and learner diagnosis should be made available to literacy program staff by independent organizations, federal and state agencies, school districts, and professional organizations. Programs need assistance in every aspect of evaluation: constructing a sound appropriate design; selecting, using, and interpreting existing measures, and divising new ones; helping staff and students grasp the need for and benefits of evaluation; and integrating activities unobtrusively into program operations. The three alliances and generic staff development models outlined above can facilitate such training and assistance.

9. Continuation of Promising and Needed Research in Adult Literacy

Along with more extensive evaluation, continued research is required to help fill the gaps in knowledge essential for improved practice. Of particular importance are unanswered questions about the differences in literacy development during childhood and adulthood, and about the functional requirements in diverse real-life settings where literacy demands occur.

10. Increased Federal Support

Any significant improvement in the scope and effectiveness of the national effort to reduce illiteracy will require major increases in funds at all levels. Unpaid volunteers are essential to the national agenda, and the call for wider recruitment and use of citizens donating their time and commitment to help others learn to read represents an invaluable resource. But, as we have seen, volunteer service is one crucial piece, not the whole answer. While efforts like the newly established Business Council for Effective Literacy continue to solicit greater support from the private sector, Federal support for a broad range of literacy programs must continue at a significantly higher level to permit expansion and improvement of delivery through more programs, more full-time professionals, support services, increased evaluation and research.

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